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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000309

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02-25-14

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SUBJECT: Campaign Snapshot: election-related violence
starts up; Buddhist leadership opposes all-monk slate

Refs: Colombo 266, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of
Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) In this message, Mission reviews the following
items related to Sri Lanka's upcoming April 2
parliamentary election campaign:

-- Incidents of election-related violence already being
reported;

-- Buddhist leadership oppose monks standing for
election;

-- Elections Commissioner sets guidelines on use of
state media;

-- Tamil party says it is running on behalf of the
Tigers;

-- "The Flavor of the Campaign": Police officials urge
parties not to distribute liquor and guns among campaign
supporters.

Incidents of election-related violence

2. (C) Nominations for Sri Lanka's upcoming April 2
parliamentary election closed at noon on February 24,
with the nominations lists now in the process of being
validated and finalized by the Election Commissioner.
Even before the nomination period ended and serious
campaigning started, however, contacts reported that
election-related violence had already begun.
Approximately 17 incidents of election-related violence
have occurred between March 10-24, ranging from minor
scuffles between supporters of opposing parties to
violent demonstrations in which police used tear gas to
disperse unruly mobs. In one of the latest such
incidents, police fired tear gas to disperse a crowd of
United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) supporters in
the central district of Kegalle after the crowd began
acting in a violent manner, according to contacts. In
another incident in the southern coastal town of Galle,
four individuals were hospitalized after being pelted
with stones by supporters of an unidentified party. In
related news, one of the main priorities of President
Kumaratunga's recently established national advisory
council to combat crime will be to battle election-
related violence. The council, which includes civil
society commentators, legal professionals, business
officials, police, and Buddhist clergy, is headed by the
Secretary of the Internal Security Ministry.

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3. (C) COMMENT: Sri Lankan elections tend to be
violent by nature, and this time around does not look
like an exception. (The 2001 parliamentary elections
were marred by violence, including fifty deaths.) The
setting up of a council which puts combating election
violence as one of its top aims is good news, although
it is not yet clear how exactly the council will work or
what its enforcement mechanism will be. The fact that
election-related violence has already begun -- over a
month before the actual election -- does not provide
much hope for a violence-free election process, despite
politicians' pleas for such. END COMMENT.

Buddhist leaders opposed to candidacy of monks

4. (C) Two leading Buddhist monks have publicly stated
their opposition to plans by a extremist Sinhalese party
to field a slate made up entirely of Buddhist monks in
the upcoming election. (According to contacts, the

monks on the Janatha Hela Urumaya, "JHU" slate are regarded as nationalistic and extremist.) In a joint February 22 announcement, the mahanayakes (High Priests) of the Malwatte and Asigirya chapters stated that "contesting parliamentary elections is the beginning of the ruin of the Buddha Sasana (existence of Buddhism) and cannot be approved under any circumstances." The mahanayakes went on to say that the role of Buddhist clergy had historically been "to advise and guide in State activities" and urged members of the clergy to fulfill their responsibility as advisors, rather than as representatives. Many Mission contacts have indicated that they are uneasy at the idea of monks running for elections, opining that this would "bring the clergy down."

15. (C) COMMENT: Although Buddhist clergy are politically important behind the scenes, as recognized by the two monks in their statement, only one Buddhist monk to date has won a seat in Parliament. The attempt by the JHU -- formerly the Sihala Urumaya party -- to get their extremist Buddhist candidates in Parliament may well backfire. The two mahanayakes are among the most influential Buddhist leaders in the country and are well respected by the majority of Buddhist faithful in Sri Lanka. The chief monks' negative opinion of JHU's slate is likely to be remembered by Sinhalese Buddhist voters come election day. END COMMENT.

Elections official sets guidelines on use of state media

16. (C) Elections Commissioner Dananda Dissanayake has set guidelines for the use of state-run television and radio during the run-up to the parliamentary election. Addressing the media on February 24, Dissanayake said "the electronic media, specially the government-owned, must be particularly scrupulous in complying in their obligation to provide accurate, balanced, and impartial information in their reporting of news and current affairs." While the full scope of the guidelines has not been made public as of yet, they seem to draw from the 17th amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution, which gives the Elections Commissioner provision to prevent the abuse of state resources during elections. Dissanayake also stated that he could name a competent authority to manage election-related broadcasts, in the event of misuse of the state media.

17. (C) COMMENT: The state-run media has been accused by the PM's party of favoring President Kumaratunga's UPFA grouping, especially since the President's November 4 takeover of the communications ministry. In fact, media reports February 25 state that the UNP is already seeking a meeting with the Communications Minister to complain about alleged state media abuses. The UPFA, for its part, has countered by saying the privately-held media favors the PM, and so it must make use of the state-run media. Civil society commentators, noting that the state-run media is indeed biased, have offered their services to the Elections Commissioner to aid in monitoring the state media for evidence of abuses. END COMMENT.

Tamil party says it is running on behalf of the Tigers

18. (C) On February 24, the pro-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) website "TamilNet" reported that R. Sampathan, a member of the pro-Tiger Tamil National Alliance (TNA), said "we openly state that the TNA is contesting the forthcoming general election on behalf of the LTTE." He continued by adding that the "TNA is contesting the forthcoming general election with only one objective. That is to show the international community that Tamils in the northeast are wholly behind the LTTE in the peace effort and Tamil people fully support the Interim Self Governing Authority proposals presented to the GSL by the LTTE." Speaking at an event in the eastern port city of Trincomalee, Sampathan also reportedly said that the upcoming election would "strengthen the hand of the LTTE in the proposed peace talks."

19. (C) COMMENT: The TNA has long been known to be pro-LTTE, and Sampathan's comments follow LTTE political chief S.P. Thamichelvam's February 17 endorsement of the TNA's slate of candidates. The Tigers' comments were the first direct involvement by the group in a political campaign. With the TNA's fulsome response, the trading of statements serves to highlight the increasing confidence of both the LTTE and the TNA in the Tigers' efforts to be involved in political campaigns in an open manner -- a contrast to their

clandestine activities of the past. END COMMENT.

Police urge no guns and liquor to party supporters

110. (U) In our "flavor of the campaign" section: On February 23, the Police Elections Secretariat requested that political parties refrain from supplying alcohol and firearms to their supporters during the period leading up to the elections. Speaking to the media, head of the Elections Secretariat Deputy Inspector General Jayantha Wickremaratne, also requested that candidates maintain control over their supporters and cooperate with authorities to ensure a violence-free campaign, noting that in the past the availability of alcohol and firearms where political supporters gathered had led to violence.

111. (C) In the past, there have been numerous instances where government officials or their relatives have been involved in altercations involving firearms, alcohol, or (usually) both. Given the examples set by this segment of politicians, the call for parties to refrain from distributing firearms and alcohol (which they call a "ready recipe for violence") is laudable. It remains to be seen, however, if the campaign will take the high road or whether it will follow the model of previous elections.

112. (U) Minimize considered.

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